

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution: How the Revolution Changed Chinese Culture and Resulted in Chinese Acceptance of New Ideas

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Paper

Historical Context

In 1958, Mao Zedong, the leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), decided that China could be self-sufficient, and launched an industrialization campaign known as the Great Leap Forward. Mao collectivized China's farms, and organized them into peasant communes. The peasants were encouraged to produce steel and other metals in "backyard" furnaces. However, due to failed planting techniques and the low output of the "backyard" furnaces, Mao's plans for industrialization did not succeed. They only resulted in widespread famine across the nation and a weakened economy.

After the Great Leap Forward, in 1960, Mao Zedong handed control of China's communist government over to three respected members of the CCP: Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, and Deng Xiaoping. Mao allowed Liu, Zhou, and Deng to repair China's economy and increase agricultural production. Yet by 1966, he was ready to be back in power because he felt that the collective leadership was undermining his authority. Mao quickly reasserted control of the government, and launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution as a way to retain power while crushing the "hidden bourgeoisie" who were "corrupting" the Party. The Cultural Revolution drastically damaged traditional Chinese society by seeking to create a new culture centered around Mao and his socialist ideology that included propaganda literature, music and movies.

Although the Cultural Revolution did not officially commence until early August 1966 with a government proclamation concerning 16 important foci of the new revolutionary campaign, the Revolution technically began about three months earlier on May 25th, 1966. That day, a Beijing University philosophy professor named Nie Yuanzi exhibited a controversial *dazibao*, or poster, on the school's campus. The poster, written by Nie, stated that the university

administration was being managed by the bourgeoisie, and criticized her University colleagues.

Mao Zedong jumped at the chance to use Nie's poster to initiate the Revolution because he believed it exemplified the purpose of the new campaign, and wanted to show the Chinese people that the Cultural Revolution was not merely his doing. Mao wanted the Chinese to truly believe that the Cultural Revolution was a mass movement. Not just "one man with a gun," as a student named Wang Rongfen dared to put it in a personal letter to him. (Wang 149-150) Mao even had the contents of the poster read on the radio. Soon afterward, on August 1st, he wrote a letter applauding the actions and the support of the first Red Guards, students at Qinghua University sympathetic to Mao's ideals.

Destroying Traditional Chinese Culture and Values

After Mao gave his approval for the Red Guard student organization at Qinghua, Red Guard organization branches sprouted up throughout the country. All of the Red Guards and other similar factions earnestly carried out Mao's instructions by "bombarding the headquarters" of the Party in search of the hidden capitalists who had supposedly infiltrated the core of the CCP, and by obliterating the "Four Olds." The "Four Olds" consisted of any ideas, culture, customs, and habits prevalent in China before the 1949 Communist Liberation. The Red Guards were so enthused and immersed in the task Mao had given them that they even invaded private homes. The Red Guards smashed and ruined many valuable historical Chinese artifacts as well as any object perceived as too "Western."

Nien Cheng, the manager for the Shanghai branch of Shell Oil Company at the time, later aptly described the destruction in her autobiography, "One young man had arranged a set of four Kangxi wine cups in a row on the floor and was stepping on them.... On the floor were fragments of porcelain in colors of oxblood, imperial yellow, celadon green and blue-and-white... Bits of

fur, silk and torn tissue paper were flying around.... The Red Guards were standing around the fire tossing my books onto the flames." (Cheng 73-79)

The situation was often much worse. The student Red Guards would often punish and beat their teachers for being capitalist intellectuals, and they had no regard for elderly people with "bad class origins." At times, teachers were even beaten to death. One of the first victims was Bian Zhongyun, a vice-principal at the Girls Middle School attached to Beijing Teachers University, and she died after enduring three hours of torture on August 5, 1966. The educational system became completely dismantled soon afterward.

After all, in his speech "Remarks at the Spring Festival" from February 1964, Mao Zedong even said that: "...teachers who ramble on and on when they lecture... should let their students doze off. If your lecture is no good, why insist on others listening to you? Rather than keeping your eyes open and listening to boring lectures, it is better to get some refreshing sleep." (Mao 157)

At the time, all the Chinese Communists were supposed to listen to Mao's instructions, so the violence against teachers may have been inspired by Mao's attitude toward formal education. If Mao said that students could sleep during lessons, why not? In that case, what was the point of having schools and teachers, anyway? In a country where education has been highly valued since the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.– 220 C.E.), when Emperor Wudi (r. 140-87 B.C.E.) established the first imperial school for training court bureaucrats, this was a sudden and radical shift in thinking.

Generating a Distrustful Culture Centered Around Mao and His Communist Ideals

Indeed, because everybody was supposed to listen to Mao during the Revolution, the Red Guards immediately strove to create a new proletarian culture suitable for a socialist society

after destroying the old Chinese culture. They created new literature and other reading materials in the form of Red Guard publications, and of course, there was Mao's *Little Red Book* of quotations. The *Little Red Book* was essentially the "Bible" of the Cultural Revolution, and people were expected to read it daily, in an almost ritual fashion. In addition to creating Maoist literature, the Red Guards and other propaganda teams also wrote new music in exaltation of Mao Zedong's glory or urging people to study his instructions. Popular songs including "Sailing on the Seas Depends on the Helmsman", "Let's Study the Sixteen Points", and "We are Chairman Mao's Red Guards", frequently blared through loudspeakers in city streets because few people had radios at home.

Propaganda movies, such as "A Song of Triumph," were also common. "A Song of Triumph" was about a deaf-mute school in Liaoning Province, and how a People's Liberation Army medical team used Mao's Little Red Book to cure the students of their disability. Other movies were designed for children, and encouraged them to serve Mao with their lives as Young Pioneers or Little Red Guards. This new culture was exactly what Mao wanted: he wanted the Chinese people to worship him as a "god."

As another example of how it changed Chinese culture, the Cultural Revolution caused people to be uneasy and afraid. People disrespected each other. People never knew who would turn against them, and reveal their "bad class origins" to the authorities. Before the Cultural Revolution, China was still a society that had been rooted in Confucian doctrine for thousands of years. Even after China became a communist state, many people still followed Confucian decorum privately. Confucianism not only stresses deference to one's parents, elders, and superiors, but also mutual respect between individuals. However, during the Cultural Revolution and other campaigns such as the Anti-Rightist Movement, everything changed. Whether or not

you were treated well depended on whether or not you had a communist background. People who had "capitalist" backgrounds were certainly not respected.

A witness to the Cultural Revolution, whom I will call Zhang, told me, "A young guy who worked for my dad was standing on the center of a stage in the middle of the city. He was saying how bad my dad was....I couldn't believe what had happened. What's going on? He's our friend, and he respects my dad.... My grandpa was one of the biggest landlords in Sichuan, and [even though] my grandma was 70 years-old, [the Red Guards] would take her out every day to humiliate her." Zhang went on to say that because she had always been taught to be kind to others, the situation during the Cultural Revolution was very confusing, and "they told kids to hate their parents." (Zhang)

People denounced by the CCP were usually either humiliated and beaten at struggle meetings, or sent to harsh labor camps in remote areas for reeducation. Ironically, in 1968, Mao decreed that all urban youth from middle school age to college age were to be reeducated in rural areas by hardworking peasants. He acknowledged that the Red Guards were getting out of control, and because the schools had already been shut down for two years, decided that hard labor could help discipline them. It was a way to solve the unemployment problem as well since the students were not in school or working.

Called the send-down policy, this was something that hardly any teenager, regardless of their class background, could escape. Even the children of CCP officials were sent down; although they often were able to return to their homes sooner than most of their peers. My uncles who were both Red Guards were sent down almost immediately. My mother, because she had skipped a grade in middle school, was also sent down at the age of 14.

She has often recounted her life at the time for me saying, "I lived in a thatch hut all by

myself in the village, and at night I was lonely and scared. I had to work in the fields all day with the peasants, and there was not enough food to eat. Sometimes, all I had to eat was rice porridge with a little preserved vegetable or sugar.... It was very cold during the winter." (Rao)

Fortunately, my mother returned home after living in that rural village for only two years, and later went on to college. Many adolescents never returned to the city, and they lost any chance of obtaining an education. Some of these students, especially former Red Guards, felt betrayed by Mao as a result, and lost their faith in the government.

How the Chinese People Have Become More Open to New Ideas After the Revolution

The events which occurred during the Cultural Revolution systematically deprived the Chinese people of their core traditional values and customs, damaged the trust and support ordinary citizens once had for the CCP, and destroyed Mao's personality cult. This opened the Chinese people's minds to new ideas. After Mao's death in 1976 and the downfall of his wife who was a driving force behind the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping returned to his post as the head of the CCP. Having fallen out of favor with Mao ten years before, Deng and Liu had both been affected by the Cultural Revolution. Zhou had deferred to Mao after he was ousted from his powerful position, and remained with Mao until he died in 1976, shortly before the death of Mao himself. Deng had been working in a factory in southern China until a few years before Mao's death, and Liu had died years earlier after being humiliated and denied medical care.

With Mao's death, Deng quickly halted the Cultural Revolution policies by implementing some reforms. He reopened all the schools, and fully opened China's doors to other countries for the first time since 1949. China was also able to develop a capitalistic economy, and more people began studying business to make money, which had not been possible under Mao.

During the Culture Revolution, people were encouraged to challenge all levels of government authority, but they could not challenge Mao. When Deng came to power, some Chinese people began to boldly question various government decisions. Some Beijing residents even set up a Democracy Wall where they pasted posters criticizing government policies, and suggesting improvements for the government. This angered Deng who tore the wall down, but his actions only caused people to become even more emboldened. On June 4, 1989 after weeks of student demonstrations, the Chinese military opened fire on thousands of young people, from around the country, who had gathered in Beijing's Tiananmen Square to fast, and protest against the government. These students, who were staging a peaceful protest, wished for China to become more democratic. The students wanted the best for their country, and yet many of them were killed or imprisoned in the event now known as the Tiananmen Square Massacre. More than 20 years after the Tiananmen Square Massacre, there are still many people who accept Western democratic ideas and openly criticize the CCP even at the risk of facing imprisonment.

Capitalism and questioning the government aren't the only new ideas influencing China today either, a large fraction of Chinese people are also exploring different religions, such as Christianity and Falun Gong. They desire for something to replace the vacuum left by both traditional Chinese culture and Mao's cult. More people began attending church after the Cultural Revolution than before, and people do not even hesitate to attend underground house churches. For example, when my family last visited China in 2005, my parents discovered that their former landlady had actually founded a house church. Other people are not interested in religion, but worship money, the global pop culture, and technology. Almost everybody in China has a cell phone and an ipod or mp3 player. Many people now have cars, and American fast food restaurants can be seen everywhere.

Conclusion

The Cultural Revolution was an innovative disaster that, in the words of Nien Cheng, could more aptly be termed the "Cultural Annihilation." The Cultural Revolution caused some of China's rich heritage to be lost forever, and it was replaced by a Mao-centered culture in which Mao was practically a god. However, because Mao had blatantly destroyed the foundation of traditional Chinese culture, and had ruined the lives of many of his followers, many Chinese lost faith in communism, which led to more receptiveness to ideas such as democracy, capitalism, and consumerism. Other people, including my parents, were able to immigrate to other countries in search of a better life thanks to Deng Xiaoping's reforms. The Cultural Revolution drastically damaged traditional Chinese society by seeking to create a new culture centered around Mao and his socialist ideology including propaganda literature, music and movies, which positively resulted in the Chinese people becoming more open-minded.

Word Count: 2, 397